

Michael Parenti

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Hidden Holocaust, USA

From *Dirty Truths* by Michael Parenti

"I've had grown men wet this floor with tears, begging for a job. We have to pray with some to keep them from killing themselves. So many say they just want to die," says Charlie Tarrance, a director of a private social agency. His task is to deal with growing lines of despairing people looking for jobs, housing, and food. The place is Gadsden, Alabama, but it could be anywhere in the United States.

It could be Washington, D.C., at a Safeway supermarket a mile or so from the White House where an elderly man is crying and holding a can of dog food. When asked what's wrong, he says, "I'm hungry. I'm hungry."

It could be New York City, where a woman begins screaming at the landlord who evicts her and her several children. The Bureau of Child Welfare takes her children, which distresses her all the more. She herself is transported to a New York mental hospital crying angrily—only to be diagnosed and committed by the all-knowing psychiatrists as a "paranoid schizophrenic."

There is misery and cruelty in the land. As U.S. leaders move determinedly toward their free-market Final Solution, stories abound of hunger, pain, and desperation. Such things have existed for a long time. Social pathology is as much a part of this society as crime and capitalism. But life is getting ever more difficult for many.

Some Grim Statistics

Conservatives are fond of telling us what a wonderful, happy, prosperous nation this is. The only thing that matches their love of country is the remarkable indifference they show toward the people who live in it. To their ears the anguished cries of the dispossessed sound like the peevish whines of malcontents. They denounce as "bleeding hearts" those of us who criticize existing conditions, who show some concern for our fellow citizens. But the dirty truth is that there exists a startling amount of hardship, abuse, affliction, illness, violence, and pathology in this country. The figures reveal a casualty list that runs into many millions. Consider the following estimates. In any one year:

- 27,000 Americans commit suicide.
- 5,000 attempt suicide; some estimates are higher.
- 26,000 die from fatal accidents in the home.

- 23,000 are murdered.
- 85,000 are wounded by firearms.
- 38,000 of these die, including 2,600 children.
- 13,000,000 are victims of crimes including assault, rape, armed robbery, burglary, larceny, and arson.
- 135,000 children take guns to school.
- 5,500,000 people are arrested for all offenses (not including traffic violations).
- 125,000 die prematurely of alcohol abuse.
- 473,000 die prematurely from tobacco-related illnesses; 53,000 of these are nonsmokers.
- 6,500,000 use heroin, crack, speed, PCP, cocaine or some other hard drug on a regular basis.
- 5,000+ die from illicit drug use. Thousands suffer serious debilitations.
- 1,000+ die from sniffing household substances found under the kitchen sink. About 20 percent of all eighth-graders have "huffed" toxic substances. Thousands suffer permanent neurological damage.
- 31,450,000 use marijuana; 3,000,000 of whom are heavy users.
- 37,000,000, or one out of every six Americans, regularly use emotion controlling medical drugs. The users are mostly women. The pushers are doctors; the suppliers are pharmaceutical companies; the profits are stupendous.
- 2,000,000 nonhospitalized persons are given powerful mind-control drugs, sometimes described as "chemical straitjackets."
- 5,000 die from psychoactive drug treatments.
- 200,000 are subjected to electric shock treatments that are injurious to the brain and nervous system.
- 600 to 1,000 are lobotomized, mostly women.
- 25,000,000, or one out of every 10 Americans, seek help from psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, or medical sources for mental and emotional problems, at a cost of over \$4 billion annually.
- 6,800,000 turn to nonmedical services, such as ministers, welfare agencies, and social counselors for help with emotional troubles. In all, some 80,000,000 have sought some kind of psychological counseling in their lifetimes.
- 1,300,000 suffer some kind of injury related to treatment at hospitals.
- 2,000,000 undergo unnecessary surgical operations; 10,000 of whom die from the surgery.
- 180,000 die from adverse reactions to all medical treatments, more than are killed by airline and automobile accidents combined.
- 14,000+ die from overdoses of legal prescription drugs.
- 45,000 are killed in auto accidents. Yet more cars and highways are being built while funding for safer forms of mass transportation is reduced.
- 1,800,000 sustain nonfatal injuries from auto accidents; but 150,000 of these auto injury victims suffer permanent impairments.
- 126,000 children are born with a major birth defect, mostly due to insufficient prenatal care, nutritional deficiency, environmental toxicity, or maternal drug addiction.
- 2,900,000 children are reportedly subjected to serious neglect or abuse, including physical torture and deliberate starvation.
- 5,000 children are killed by parents or grandparents.

- 30,000 or more children are left permanently physically disabled from abuse and neglect. Child abuse in the United States afflicts more children each year than leukemia, automobile accidents, and infectious diseases combined. With growing unemployment, incidents of abuse by jobless parents is increasing dramatically.
- 1,000,000 children run away from home, mostly because of abusive treatment, including sexual abuse, from parents and other adults. Of the many sexually abused children among runaways, 83 percent come from white families.
- 150,000 children are reported missing.
- 50,000 of these simply vanish. Their ages range from one year to mid-teens. According to the New York Times, "Some of these are dead, perhaps half of the John and Jane Does annually buried in this country are unidentified kids."
- 900,000 children, some as young as seven years old, are engaged in child labor in the United States, serving as underpaid farm hands, dishwashers, laundry workers, and domestics for as long as ten hours a day in violation of child labor laws.
- 2,000,000 to 4,000,000 women are battered. Domestic violence is the single largest cause of injury and second largest cause of death to U.S. women.
- 700,000 women are raped, one every 45 seconds.
- 5,000,000 workers are injured on the job; 150,000 of whom suffer permanent work-related disabilities, including maiming, paralysis, impaired vision, damaged hearing, and sterility.
- 100,000 become seriously ill from work-related diseases, including black lung, brown lung, cancer, and tuberculosis.
- 14,000 are killed on the job; about 90 percent are men.
- 100,000 die prematurely from work-related diseases.
- 60,000 are killed by toxic environmental pollutants or contaminants in food, water, or air.
- 4,000 die from eating contaminated meat.
- 20,000 others suffer from poisoning by E.coli O157-H7, the mutant bacteria found in contaminated meat that generally leads to lifelong physical and mental health problems. A more thorough meat inspection with new technologies could eliminate most instances of contamination--so would vegetarianism.

At present:

- 5,100,000 are behind bars or on probation or parole; 2,700,000 of these are either locked up in county, state or federal prisons or under legal supervision. Each week 1,600 more people go to jail than leave. The prison population has skyrocketed over 200 percent since 1980. Over 40 percent of inmates are jailed on nonviolent drug related crimes. African Americans constitute 13 percent of drug users but 35 percent of drug arrests, 55 percent of drug convictions and 74 percent of prison sentences. For nondrug offenses, African Americans get prison terms that average about 10 percent longer than Caucasians for similar crimes.
- 15,000+ have tuberculosis, with the numbers growing rapidly; 10,000,000 or more carry the tuberculosis bacilli, with large numbers among the economically deprived or addicted.
- 10,000,000 people have serious drinking problems; alcoholism is on the rise.
- 16,000,000 have diabetes, up from 11,000,000 in 1983 as Americans get more sedentary and sugar addicted. Left untreated, diabetes can lead to blindness, kidney failure and nerve damage.

- 160,000 will die from diabetes this year.
- 280,000 are institutionalized for mental illness or mental retardation. Many of these are forced into taking heavy doses of mind control drugs.
- 255,000 mentally ill or retarded have been summarily released in recent years. Many of the "deinstitutionalized" are now in flophouses or wandering the streets.
- 3,000,000 or more suffer cerebral and physical handicaps including paralysis, deafness, blindness, and lesser disabilities. A disproportionate number of them are poor. Many of these disabilities could have been corrected with early treatment or prevented with better living conditions.
- 2,400,000 million suffer from some variety of seriously incapacitating chronic fatigue syndrome.
- 10,000,000+ suffer from symptomatic asthma, an increase of 145 percent from 1990 to 1995, largely due to the increasingly polluted quality of the air we breathe.
- 40,000,000 or more are without health insurance or protection from catastrophic illness.
- 1,800,000 elderly who live with their families are subjected to serious abuse such as forced confinement, underfeeding, and beatings. The mistreatment of elderly people by their children and other close relatives grows dramatically as economic conditions worsen.
- 1,126,000 of the elderly live in nursing homes. A large but undetermined number endure conditions of extreme neglect, filth, and abuse in homes that are run with an eye to extracting the highest possible profit.
- 1,000,000 or more children are kept in orphanages, reformatories, and adult prisons. Most have been arrested for minor transgressions or have committed no crime at all and are jailed without due process. Most are from impoverished backgrounds. Many are subjected to beatings, sexual assault, prolonged solitary confinement, mind control drugs, and in some cases psychosurgery.
- 1,000,000 are estimated to have AIDS as of 1996; over 250,000 have died of that disease.
- 950,000 school children are treated with powerful mind control drugs for "hyperactivity" every year--with side effects like weight loss, growth retardation and acute psychosis.
- 4,000,000 children are growing up with unattended learning disabilities.
- 4,500,000+ children, or more than half of the 9,000,000 children on welfare, suffer from malnutrition. Many of these suffer brain damage caused by prenatal and infant malnourishment.
- 40,000,000 persons, or one of every four women and more than one of every ten men, are estimated to have been sexually molested as children, most often between the ages of 9 and 12, usually by close relatives or family acquaintances. Such abuse almost always extends into their early teens and is a part of their continual memory and not a product of memory retrieval in therapy.
- 7,000,000 to 12,000,000 are unemployed; numbers vary with the business cycle. Increasing numbers of the chronically unemployed show signs of stress and emotional depression.
- 6,000,000 are in "contingent" jobs, or jobs structured to last only temporarily. About 60 percent of these would prefer permanent employment.
- 15,000,000 or more are part-time or reduced-time "contract" workers who need full-time jobs and who work without benefits.
- 3,000,000 additional workers are unemployed but uncounted because their unemployment benefits have run out, or they never qualified for benefits, or they have

given up looking for work, or they joined the armed forces because they were unable to find work.

- 80,000,000 live on incomes estimated by the U.S. Department of Labor as below a “comfortable adequacy”; 35,000,000 of these live below the poverty level.
- 12,000,000 of those at poverty’s rock bottom suffer from chronic hunger and malnutrition. The majority of the people living at or below the poverty level experience hunger during some portion of the year.
- 2,000,000 or more are homeless, forced to live on the streets or in makeshift shelters.
- 160,000,000+ are members of households that are in debt, a sharp increase from the 100 million of less than a decade ago. A majority indicate they have borrowed money not for luxuries but for necessities. Mounting debts threaten a financial crack-up in more and more families.

A Happy Nation?

Obviously these estimates include massive duplications. Many of the 20 million unemployed are among the 35 million below the poverty level. Many of the malnourished children are also among those listed as growing up with untreated learning disabilities and almost all are among the 35 million poor. Many of the 37 million regular users of mind-control drugs also number among the 25 million who seek psychiatric help.

Interesting read: Concerned friends and family can always call [a hotline for substance abusers](#) if they really are bent on helping a drug-addicted loved one out.

Some of these deprivations and afflictions are not as serious as others. The 80 million living below the “comfortably adequate” income level may compose too vague and inclusive a category for some observers (who themselves enjoy a greater distance from the poverty line). The 40 million who are without health insurance are not afflicted by an actual catastrophe but face only a potential one (though the absence of health insurance often leads to a lack of care and eventually a serious health crisis). We might not want to consider the 5.5 million arrested as having endured a serious affliction, but what of the 1.5 million who are serving time and what of their victims? We might want to count only the 150,000 who suffer a serious job-related disability rather than the five million on-the-job injuries, only half of the 20 million unemployed and underemployed so as not to duplicate poverty figures, only 10 percent of the 1.1 million institutionalized elderly as mistreated (although the number is probably higher), only 10 per cent of the 37 million regular users of medically prescribed psychogenic drugs as seriously troubled, only 5 per cent of the 160 million living in indebted families as seriously indebted (although the number is probably higher).

If we consider only those who have endured physical or sexual abuse, or have been afflicted with a serious disability, or a serious deprivation such as malnutrition and homelessness, only those who face untimely deaths due to suicide, murder, battering, drug and alcohol abuse, industrial and motor vehicle accidents, medical (mis)treatment, occupational illness, and sexually transmitted diseases, we are still left with a staggering figure of over 19,000,000 victims. To put the matter in some perspective, in the 12 years that saw 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam, several million died prematurely within the United States from unnatural and often violent causes.

Official bromides to the contrary, we are faced with a hidden holocaust, a social pathology of staggering dimensions. Furthermore, the above figures do not tell the whole story. In almost every category an unknown number of persons go unreported. For instance, the official tabulation of 35 million living in poverty is based on census data that undercount transients, homeless people, and those living in remote rural and crowded inner-city areas. Also, the designated poverty line is set at an unrealistically low income level and takes insufficient account of how inflation especially affects the basics of food, fuel, housing, and health care that consume such a disproportionate chunk of lower incomes. Some economists estimate that actually as many as 46 million live in conditions of acute economic want.

Left uncouned are the more than two thousand yearly deaths in the U.S. military due to training and transportation accidents, and the many murders and suicides in civilian life that are incorrectly judged as deaths from natural causes, along with the premature deaths from cancer caused by radioactive and other carcinogenic materials in the environment. Almost all cancer deaths are now thought to be from human-made causes.

Fatality figures do not include the people who are incapacitated and sickened from the one thousand potentially toxic additional chemicals that industry releases into the environment each year, and who die years later but still prematurely. At present there are at least 51,000 industrial toxic dump sites across the country that pose potentially serious health hazards to communities, farmlands, water tables, and livestock. One government study has concluded that the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat are now perhaps the leading causes of death in the United States.

None of these figures include the unhappiness, bereavement, and longterm emotional wounds inflicted upon the many millions of loved ones, friends, and family members who are close to the victims.

Public Policy, Personal Pain

If things are so bad, why then has the U.S. mortality rate been declining? The decline over the last half-century has been due largely to the dramatic reduction in infant mortality and the containment of many contagious diseases, largely through improvement in public health standards. Furthermore, years of industrial struggle by working people, especially in the twentieth century, brought a palpable betterment in certain conditions. In other words, as bad as things are now, in earlier times some things were even worse. For example, about 14,000 persons are killed on the job annually, but in 1916 the toll was 35,000, with the labor force less than half what it is today.

The growth in health consciousness that has led millions to quit smoking, exercise more regularly, and have healthier diets also has reduced mortality rates, especially among those over 40. The 55-mile per hour speed limit and the crackdown on drunken driving contributed by cutting into highway fatalities. But the cancer death rate and most of the other pathologies and life diminishing conditions listed earlier continue in an upward direction. Small wonder the climb in life expectancy has leveled off to a barely perceptible crawl in recent years.

When compared to other nations, we discover we are not as Number One-ish as we might think. The U.S. infant mortality rate is higher than in thirteen other countries. And in life expectancy, 20-year-old U.S. males rank thirty-sixth among the world's nations, and 20-year-

old females are twenty-first. The additional tragedy of these statistics is that most of the casualties are not inevitable products of the human condition, but are due mostly to the social and material conditions created by our profits-before-people corporate system. Consider a few examples.

First, it may be that industrial production will always carry some kind of risk, but the present rate of attrition can be largely ascribed to inadequate safety standards, speedup, and lax enforcement of safety codes. Better policies can make a difference. In the chemical industry alone, regulations put out by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)—at a yearly cost to industry of \$140 per worker—brought a 23 percent drop in accidents and sickness, averting some 90,000 illnesses and injuries.

OSHA's resources are pathetically inadequate. It has only enough inspectors to visit each workplace once every eighty years. Workplace standards to control the tens of thousands of toxic substances are issued at the rate of less than three a year. Even this feeble effort has been more than business could tolerate. Under the Reagan and Bush administrations, OSHA began removing protections, exempting most firms from routine safety inspections, and weakening the cotton dust, cancer, and lead safety standards, and a worker's right to see company medical records.

Second, it may be that in any society some children will sicken and die. But better nutrition and health care make a difference. The Women, Infants and Children nutrition program (WIC) did cut down on starvation and hunger. On the other hand, years after passing a law making some thirteen million children eligible for medical examination and treatment, Congress discovered that almost 85 percent of the youngsters had been left unexamined, causing, in the words of a House subcommittee report, “unnecessary crippling, retardation, or even death of thousands of children.”

Third, it may be that medical treatment will always have its hazards, but given the way health care is organized in the United States, money often makes the difference between life and death. Many sick people die simply because they receive insufficient care or are treated too late. Health insurance premiums have risen astronomically and hospital bills have grown five times faster than the overall cost of living. Yet it is almost universally agreed that people are not receiving better care, only more expensive care, and in some areas the quality of care has deteriorated.

Some physicians have cheated Medicaid and Medicare of hundreds of millions of dollars by consistently overcharging for services and tests; fraudulently billing for nonexistent patients or for services not rendered; charging for unneeded treatments, tests, and hospital admissions—and most unforgivable of all—performing unnecessary surgery. Meanwhile, private health insurance companies make profits by raising premiums and withholding care. So people are paying more than ever for health insurance while getting less than ever.

Fourth, it may be that automobile accidents are unavoidable in any society with millions of motor vehicles, but why have we become increasingly dependent on this costly, dangerous, and ecologically disastrous form of transportation? In transporting people, one railroad or subway car can do the work of fifty automobiles. Railroads consume a sixth of the energy used by trucks to transport goods.

These very efficiencies are what make railroads so undesirable to the oil and auto lobbies. For over a half-century, giant corporations like General Motors, Standard Oil of California, and Firestone Tires bought up most of the nation's clean and safe electric streetcar networks, dismantled them, and cut back on all public transportation, thereby forcing people to rely more and more on private cars. The monorail in Japan, a commuter train that travels much faster than any train, has transported some three billion passengers without an injury or fatality. The big oil and auto companies in the U.S. have successfully blocked the construction of monorails here.

In ways not yet mentioned corporate and public policies gravely affect private lives. Birth deformities, for instance, are not just a quirk of nature, as the heartbroken parents of Love Canal or the thalidomide children can testify. Many such defects are caused by fast-buck companies that treat our environment like a septic tank. Unsafe products are another cause; there are hundreds of hair dyes, food additives, cosmetics, and medicines marketed for quick profits which have been linked to cancer, birth defects, and other illnesses.

The food industry, seeking to maximize profits, offers ever increasing amounts of highly processed, chemicalized, low-nutrition foods. Bombarded by junk-food advertising over the last thirty years, TV viewers, especially younger ones, have changed their eating habits dramatically. Per capita consumption of vegetables and fruits is down 20 to 25 per cent while consumption of cakes, pastry, soft drinks, and other snacks is up 70 to 80 per cent. According to a U.S. Senate report, the increased consumption of junk foods "may be as damaging to the nation's health as the widespread contagious diseases of the early part of the century." All this may start showing up on the actuarial charts when greater numbers of the younger junk-food generation move into middle age.

In 1995-96, a Republican-controlled Congress pushed for further cuts in environmental and consumer safety standards and in the regulation of industry, cuts in various public health programs, and cuts in nutritional programs for children and pregnant women. State and local governments are also cutting back on public protection programs and human services in order to pay the enormous sums owed to the banks and to compensate for reductions in federal aid. Thus New York City took such "economy measures" as closing all of its venereal disease clinics and most of its drug rehabilitation and health centers.

We are told that wife-beating, child abuse, alcoholism, drug abuse, and other such pathologies know no class boundaries and are found at all income levels. This is true but misleading. The impression left is that these pathologies are randomly distributed across the social spectrum and are purely a matter of individual pathology. Actually, many of them are skewed heavily toward the low-income, the unemployed, and the dispossessed. As economic conditions worsen, so afflictions increase. Behind many of these statistics is the story of class, racial, sexual, and age oppressions that have long been among the legacies of our social order, oppressions that are seldom discussed in any depth by political leaders, news media, or educators.

In addition, more and more middle-income people are hurting from the Third Worldization of America, suffering from acute stress, alcoholism, job insecurity, insufficient income, high rents, heavy mortgage payments, high taxes, and crushing educational and medical costs. And almost all of us eat the pesticide-ridden foods, breathe the chemicalized air, and risk drinking the toxic water and being exposed to the contaminating wastes of our increasingly

chemicalized, putrefied environment. I say “almost all of us” because the favored few live on country estates, ranches, seashore mansions, and summer hideaways where the air is relatively fresh. And, like President Reagan, they eat only the freshest food and meat derived from organically fed steers that are kept free of chemical hormones—while telling the rest of us not to get hysterical about pesticides and herbicides and chemical additives.

All this explains why many of us find little cause for rejoicing about America the Beautiful. It is not that we don’t love our country, but that we do. We love not just an abstraction called “the USA’ but the people who live in it. And we believe that the pride of a nation should not be used to hide the social and economic disorder that is its shame. The American dream is becoming a nightmare for many. A concern for collective betterment, for ending the abuses of free-market plunder, is of the utmost importance. “People before profits” is not just a slogan, it is our only hope.

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